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## [John Bolton on the Summits 1: Singapore](#)

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By **Stephan Haggard**

Whatever we think of John Bolton's motives or policy approach, *The Room Where It Happened* provides detail to our understanding of the Singapore (Ch. 4) and Hanoi (Ch. 11) summits. Bolton starts with an interesting claim about the very origins of the first meeting between Kim and Trump. Chung Eui-yong, South Korea's Director of National Security, appeared to only be carrying a message from Kim Jong-un when he proposed the summit idea to Trump in his Oval Office visit in March 2018. Bolton claims, however, that the very idea of issuing the invitation had actually come from the South Korean side (p. 78 and fn. 3, p. 503).

Chung repeatedly tried to assure a deeply-skeptical Bolton that President Moon had been pushing for a public North Korean commitment to "complete verifiable and irreversible denuclearization," Bolton's favored language dating to his time in the Bush administration. Although Chung claimed that Kim Jong-un had "seemed amenable," North Korea had no interest in making commitments to Moon on the nuclear front, using that channel to develop North-South relations and drive wedges between Washington and Seoul. The Panmunjom declaration does little more than characterize denuclearization as a common goal, and pats Pyongyang on the back for what it had already done on the issue (such as the media stunt at Punggye-ri):

"The two sides confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.

The two sides shared the view that the measures being initiated by the north side are very meaningful and crucial for the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and agreed to fulfill their respective responsibility and role."

As we will see, however, that language actually anticipates the Singapore outcome to a surprising extent.

The central theme of Bolton's analysis of Singapore is simple: that Trump's eagerness permitted Kim Jong-un to structure the summit outcome to his advantage. The only substantive issue effectively resolved by the leaders' meeting itself was the concession Kim Jong-un sought on exercises (p. 110), which played perfectly on Trump's skepticism about the alliances.

But the real action—or inaction to be more precise—was occurring at the working level talks at Panmunjom. Summits do not typically resolve issues; rather, leaders [present what has already been negotiated by the sherpas](#). Although Bolton expresses his animus toward the State Department negotiators, whom he saw as soft, it was precisely at this level that the North Koreans proved most masterful. The risk of North Korean stonewalling was that if absolutely nothing happened in the working level talks, political pressure would mount for Trump to cancel, or at least postpone, the summit. Bolton details several such near-death cycles (for example, around Choe Son-hui's attack on the Vice President); as he admits openly, each raised his hopes. However as the President was meeting with Kim Yong-chol as late as June 1—[crowing about the meeting and the letter from Kim Jong-un](#)—North Korean negotiators at the DMZ were rejecting the draft U.S. approach at the Panmunjom



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negotiations. By this time, Trump was already openly stating that Singapore would be little more than a photo-op, the beginning of a “process” that would involve incremental steps. This outcome was precisely what hawks like Bolton feared.

As we now know, the outcome was worse than Bolton either feared or even admits in *The Room Where It Happened*. Despite Bolton’s attention to detail throughout the book, there is barely a mention of the summit statement itself and certainly no sustained analysis of it. Yet as I have [detailed elsewhere](#), the joint statement contained pretty much everything North Korea could have wanted, starting with a weak and ambiguous commitment to denuclearization (“...reaffirming the April 27, 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, the DPRK commits to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”). More significant was the priority given to improving bilateral relations and working toward a peace regime ahead of denuclearization, and above all the step-by-step approach that was implicit as a result.

Bolton also is largely silent about the biggest shock of the summit, which came in President Trump’s press conference following the leaders’ meeting. The president not only [promised](#) to pause exercises but described them as provocative, costly and unnecessary. He even suggested that U.S. troops might even be withdrawn altogether. What more could Kim Jong-un ask for?

In fact, the problem with the summit was not in accepting the inevitability of some kind of step-by-step process. Bolton is misguided in thinking that the United States could hold out for a deal in which complete denuclearization would be achieved absent any concessions. Why would the North Koreans commit to a negotiation of that sort? The problem with the summit was the complete dissipation of leverage once it had been wrapped up. Bolton is completely right that the United States needed to get something concrete beyond a freeze, and that a baseline declaration of their capabilities was a reasonable place to start; how can you have negotiations if there is no agreement about what is even up for discussion? (p. 117). Yet Trump’s misguided belief that he and Kim could resolve things at the leaders’ meeting meant inadequate focus on progress in the working level talks.

In early July, Pompeo was learning that the North had walked out of Singapore with a very different picture of what had occurred; Pyongyang was in no mood for concessions (p. 117-118). In five hours of negotiation with Kim Yong-chol, Pompeo got precisely nothing. Trump was effectively forced to cancel a second Pompeo trip when told that he would not meet with Kim Jong-un (which he had failed to do in the July meeting as well).

At the same time, Kim Jong-un continued to ply President Trump with love letters, dangling the prospect of another summit (which Moon Jae-in also urged), while insisting that the U.S. come up with new proposals. Bolton closes the chapter on Singapore with a surprisingly blunt assessment of how the bar had been lowered in the second half of 2018: “But we had at least survived past the November congressional elections without any major disasters and could now face the next round of Trump enthusiasm to meet with Kim Jong Un.”

In the next post, a discussion of Bolton’s chapter on Hanoi. A review of Bolton’s *Surrender is Not an Option* can be found [here](#).

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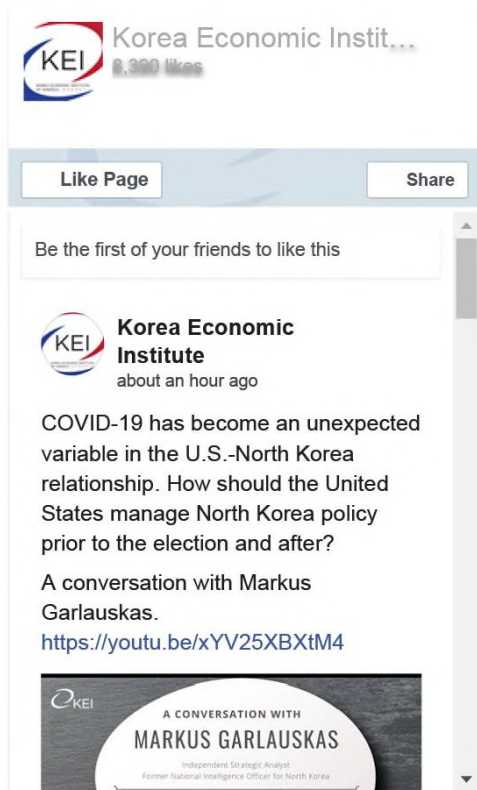
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